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A new home in Sun Prairie at no cost for a disabled veteran and his wife

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SUN PRAIRIE — If a house is a home that shelters the body and comforts the soul, then Brenda and Chuck Isaacson found out Wednesday that they already have half a house.

For there was no lack of soul comforters Wednesday morning at a grassy parcel of land on Burke Road to show the Isaacsons what will be done to shelter their bodies.

A hole will be dug, a foundation poured, a house custom-built for their needs, all at no cost to the Isaacsons, an unabashedly cheerful couple facing the not-too-cheerful reality of the irreparable cost of conflict.

Chuck Isaacson, from Wisconsin Rapids, while on his eighth tour of duty overseas for the U.S. Army as a helicopter repair specialist, fell with 21 others from the Afghanistan sky on Feb. 17, 2007, in a helicopter that lost an engine in a ferocious storm.

Eight were killed, and Isaacson's injuries were numerous and disabling — limbs broken, lungs collapsed, neck and back injuries that still persist. He is a paraplegic.

The accident happened on their wedding anniversary, just five days before his tour was to end.

The long road home has passed through hospitals in Germany, Florida and what was their home in Clarksville, Tenn. But with that residence ill-fit for an active young man in a wheelchair, schoolteacher Brenda from Westfield and Chuck from Rapids — he met then-Brenda Mockler on a 90-minute blind-date telephone call — moved back to friends and family in Wisconsin.

But an apartment in Sun Prairie that might comfortably house an able-bodied couple does not meet the long-term special needs of the Isaacsons.

So Wednesday, the focus was on a soon-to-be hole outlined with bright pink wooden stakes people kept tripping over, surrounded by friends and relatives and friendly strangers. A private agency, Homes for Our Troops, based in Massachusetts, has agreed to build the Isaacsons a house.

The group, now working on house No. 54, according to spokesman Tom Benoit, builds houses for severely disabled veterans. The agency buys land, solicits donations from local contractors, finds a trusted area general contractor — in this case, Brookstone Homes in Oconomowoc — and pays for what is not donated.

Benoit said the houses are built with the latest in green technologies, but more importantly, they are built barrier-free and with systems that encourage independence.

"I'm looking forward to accessible bathrooms and kitchen," said Isaacson, now a computer management student at nearby Herzing College.

There is no cost to the family for the house, and the group pointedly avoids politics. A five- to 10-year lien is placed on every house built, said Benoit, as a strategy to assure owner responsibility.

Wednesday, assorted dignitaries — U.S. Rep. Tammy Baldwin, state Sen. Julie Lassa, Sun Prairie Mayor Joe Chase — mingled with people who just could not help coming up to the garrulous young man in the wheelchair to say hello, thank you, stay well, glad you're here and, by the way, thank you.

Members of the Sun Prairie American Legion Post 333 and VFW Post 9362 color guard, almost shy, shook Chuck's hand and looked him in the eye when they said "you just call if you need anything."

Likewise, and with the same unabashed camaraderie, four members of the Patriot Guard Riders, clad in motorcycle attire, quietly introduced themselves and intimated that same unconditional support would be forthcoming.

It all infused a kind of optimism in Brenda, Chuck and the assembled, as shovels were vigorously jammed into a square of soil that had been "pre-softened." A "Build Brigade" overseen by Brookstone has a four-month build schedule, said Steve DeCleene, of Brookstone.

"As Americans," said Benoit, explaining the philosophy of Homes for Our Troops, "if we are going to send our men and women out to fight, we have a responsibility to do everything in our power to help them get back to the lives they had."

That sentiment echoed Wednesday, and only a lack of ground-breaking ceremony shovels and practical footwear stopped everyone from digging in right then.

HOMES FOR OUR TROOPS

The non-government organization Homes for Our Troops relies on donations to build homes for qualified injured vets to fit individual needs.